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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

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Item 5 of the provisional agenda**

REPORT ON MEASURES TAKEN BY AFRICAN COUNTRIES TO REDUCE POST-HARVEST FOOD LOSSES

Executive Summary

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1. The importance of post-harvest food losses in developing countries including in Africa was given the right consideration by the seventh special session of the United Nations General Assembly held in 1975. The Assembly adopted resolution 3362 (S-VII) which, inter alia, called for a drastic reduction of post-harvest food losses and recommended that the goal of 50 per cent reduction be attained by 1985. The African countries fully endorsed this resolution and included in the Lagos Plan of Action specific measures to be taken by all member States in order to practically prevent and reduce post-harvest food losses.

2. Such losses are commodity and location specific. For cereal and legume grains, they occur at every stage of the post-harvest system including during harvest, primary processing, transportation, storage and processing. With regard more particularly to stored food grains, the inadequacy of storage structures and the abundance of insect pests have been found to being the major main cuases of serious post-harvest food loss in Africa. As regard the damage caused by insect pests, Trogoderma granarium and Prostephanus truncatus are becoming a serious calamity since the first pest inflicts important losses to stored grains in the chronic food deficit countries of the region (mainly in the Sudano-Sahelian zone) and the second is a real threat in the promising maize growing areas (in Eastern and Southern Africa and in coastal West Africa). Besides food grains, root and tuber crops and fruits and vegetables are subject to high losses due to their perishability. Also, losses in fishery products are considerable even in cured products which are intended to be stored for some time.

3. Measures taken by member States to tackle this preoccupying problems included mass-media sensitization campaigns, the establishment of institutions charged with the responsibility of implementing post-harvest loss-reduction programmes, the improvement of operations of the food marketing boards, strengthening the extension services and developing or adapting post-harvest technologies including food processing facilities. At the subregional and regional levels, some attempts in co-operative programmes of improving post-production operations have been made. The efforts of African countries in reducing and preventing post-harvest food losses were significantly supported by:

(a) International organizations including the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and some other United Nations agencies which intervened either directly or indirectly in the related programmes;

(b) Development agencies which collaborated for the purpose of reducing post-harvest food losses, and principally regarding cereal grains, within the Group of Assistance on Systems Relating to Grain after Harvest (GASGA);

(c) Voluntary non-governmental organizations.

4. Although the measures taken by member States and the supportive programmes implemented by the international community have brought about positive results

in improving the post-production operations, the issue remains of great concern in 1986 as various ongoing programmes reported that present losses are still important in many cases. Actual losses range from about 1 to 3 per cent for cereal grains in some countries to about 20 per cent in others. Also during the past 10 years, more resources have been allocated for improving central storage structures and less for village or on-farm stores. Moreover, most of the activities in the past concentrated on reducing losses in cereal grains and less has been done for preserving perishables. The question on whether the target of 50 per cent reduction is attained by 1985 is rather difficult to respond to.

5. If there is no doubt that, during the period 1975 to 1985, the requesite knowledge on how to prevent post-harvest food losses has been gathered, tackling practically the problem is yet to be achieved and will require that efforts are pursued. Although there is no panacea in reducing post-harvest food losses, it is proposed that:

(a) At the national level

(i) the awareness of decision makers of the importance of post-harvest food losses be maintained;

(ii) member States integrate food loss-reduction programmes in national agricultural development programmes;

(iii) Governments establish functional co-ordinating units charged with all related activities;

(iv) training activities be intensified in order to make available the required technical skills.

(b) At the subregional level

(i) member States co-operate in programmes aiming at the development and adaptation of post-production technologies proper to local food commodities;

(ii) post-production committees be established to ensure an effective exchange of information.

(c) At the international level

(i) the efforts of international organizations, development agencies and voluntary organizations be pursued, intensified and better co-ordinated;

(ii) programmes related to preventing and reducing post-harvest food losses be geared towards strengthening the technological capability of member States, or only through bilateral arrangements between them and developed countries but also with other developing countries;

(iii) the practical aid provided to member States to reduce post-harvest food losses be integrated to the general technical and economic assistance.